

# ***First Purpose of Civil Government***

*by Thomas W. Jacobson (8 October 2013)*

The idea of government originated in the Creator God, not in man. From the beginning, He created mankind accountable to Him. In the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve rebelled against Him, He exercised direct governing authority in rendering judgment for their sin (Genesis 3). Their new sinful nature was transmitted from generation to generation, all the way to us. When their first-born, Cain, killed their second-born, Abel, God directly intervened and rendered judgment, because Cain's parents had no civil authority (Genesis 4:6-15). Within 10 generations, all of mankind became so evil that the LORD decided to destroy every person, except for Noah and his family whom He found righteous.

Can you imagine life on earth before the Great Flood, when it had become populous, but almost everyone had turned away from God and become wicked? There was no rule of law, no safety, no peace, no public order. Everyone was a law unto themselves, and their security was their own responsibility. Every person lived in fear, and their lives were constantly at risk. Anarchy, confusion, and chaos reigned. (It appears we are rapidly moving to the same conditions today.)

“Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. The LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land ... for I am sorry that I have made them.’ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. ... Then GOD said to Noah ... ‘Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life ... But I will establish My covenant with you’” (Genesis 6:5-8, 13, 18).

After the Great Flood, the LORD God did a most gracious and benevolent act: He delegated some of His authority to mankind to punish evil and render justice. He said,

“Surely I will require your lifeblood ... from *every* man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of GOD He made man” (Genesis 9:5-6).

Thus, for the first time, God granted people the authority to establish their own civil governments that would act on His behalf, establishing lawful order, protecting human life, and rendering righteous judgments, including the death penalty.

Great Britain, for example, formerly understood this foundation for civil authority. The Magna Carta, 1215 A.D., begins with, “John, by the grace of God, king of England.” The First Charter of Virginia, 1606 A.D., begins, “James, by the Grace of God, King of England.”<sup>1</sup>

The founding generations of the United States understood that civil authority comes from God through the people, as evident in the 1776 Declaration of Independence:

“(T)he separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them” ... (par. 1);

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” (par. 2).

In conclusion, ***the first purpose of civil government is to exercise lawful authority that is delegated by God.*** It is a necessary institution to restrain wickedness and establish justice, which brings public order and safety. If it fails, or is unwilling to do, this God-ordained purpose, then from that point it begins a journey toward oppression and despotism.

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All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>1</sup> Sources of Our Liberties: Documentary Origins of Individual Liberties in the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights, edited by Richard L. Perry (Chicago, American Bar Foundation, 1978), pp. 11, 39.